the Government had ordered a market intervention operation for procurement of 10,000 MT of natural rubber during 1997 by STC. This procurement has been further extended in May, 1998 to an additional quantity of 20,000 MT.

(c) In order to discourage indiscriminate import of used tyres, a minimum C.I.F. value restriction has been imposed on import of used tyres by the Government of India.

As Polyurethane is a material of versatile properties and also the quantity of polyurethane being imported is not substantial enough to pose a threat to rubber/latex, total ban on its import is not desirable and would affect the competitive advantage of the domestic foam industry.

(d) For providing a remunerative price to the rubber growers, the Ministry of Finance has already undertaken a study into the cost of production of Natural Rubber with a view to revising the Benchmark Price for rubber. The STC, who have been directed in May, 1998 to procure 20,000 MT of Natural Rubber at the prevailing market price not exceeding Rs. 34/per kg., have been directed to export the procured rubber and/or sell it only to the Advance Licence Holders.

Poor Tobacco Crop

1221. SHRI YERRA NARAYANASWAMY: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether Tobacco Board has taken cognizance of the poor tobacco crop in 1997-98 season;

(b) if so, what steps the Tobacco Board has taken to assist the tobacco farmers of Andhra Pradesh;

(c) whether any financial assistance has been given directly by the Tobacco Board to farmers; and

(d) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) and (b) Tobacco Board had authorised a crop size 110 Million. Kgs. of FCV tobacco in Andhra Pradesh for the year 1997-98 against which the estimated production is 118 Million Kgs. Due to unseasonal and incessent rains during Nov./Dec. 97 there was some damage caused to the standing tobacco crop & tobacco curing barns. Further, some tobacco crop was also affected by the brown spot disease. The farmers were assisted by the Board in securing additional crop loans for rejuvenation of their damaged crops and repair of the barns. A loan subsidy by the Tobacco Board to the extent of Rs. 3.90 crores was approved by the Government for giving assistance to the affected SC/ST, small & marginal farmers to compensate the losses sustained. Tobacco Board has also made available pesticides on credit to the farmers for control of the disease at its auction platforms.

(a) and (d) Direct financial assistance was not provided to the farmers.The financial assistance by way of the Rs. 3.9 crores loan subsidy was extended through banking channels. Details of assistance availed by the farmers are:—

(Rs. in cores)

Category of farmers	No. of farmers	Financial Assistance
Small Farmers	7919	1.36
Marginal Farmers	2676	0.53
SC/ST Farmers	383	0.10
TOTAL	10.978	1.99

Registration of Tobacco Farmers

1222. SHRI YERRA NARAYANASWAMY: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that Tobacco Board does not facilitate registration

centres for tobacco farmers from West Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh;

(b) the number of offices or registration centres for tobacco farmers in West Godavari district;

(c) how does the Tobacco Board propose to assist farmers in this regard; and

(d) if so, the details of steps proposed?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) No, Sir.

(b) The Tobacco Board have established 3 offices (Auction platform) at Jangareddygudem, Koyyalagudem and Devarapalli in West Godavari district for registering farmers. Farmers in the tobacco growing village in and around Kovvuru were facilitated to register at 'Thorredu' auction platform located in East Godavari district.

(c) and (d) The Tobacco Board Proposes to register the farmers for the 1998-99 crop season at their allotted auction platforms centres as was done in the previous years. The opening and closing dates of registration will be informed to the growers by the field staff of the Board and also displayed on the Notice Boards at Tobacco Board Offices and widely publicised through press and other media. Applications, if any, received after closure of the registration date but before the meeting of the Registration Committee will be considered by the Registration Committee, if these applications are otherwise found to be eligible as per the criteria laid down.

Increase in Trade Deficit

1223. SHRI O.P. KOHLI: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that even after improvement in the export performance there has been heavy increase in the trade deficit;

(b) if so, the reasons therefor and the steps tken to improve the trade deficit; and

(c) whether the customs, excise collections have fallen short of target?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) As per the provisional data available from Directorate General, Commercial Intelligence and Statistics, exports registred a growth of 2.64% in US $ terms in 1997-98 as against 4.01% in 1996-97.

This has resulated in a higher trade deficit of Rs. 25267.76 crores in 1997-98. The correspondiong figures for 1996-97 is Rs. 19319.76 crores;

(b) The trade deficit is the excess of imports over exports. There has an increased in overall imports due to increase import of petroleum products and fertilizers besides raw materials and intermediates required for domestic production and exports, which is the basic need of a vibrant economy. The key to reducing trade deficit lies in accelerated export growth and export promotion measures are continuously being taken by the Government to enhance the export growth of the country.

(c) Yes, Sir.

Import of Mineral Water

1224. SHRI S.M. KRISHNA: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have allowed the import of mineral/natural spring water;

(b) if so, since when and the details of the names of companies importing mineral water/natural spring water specially under the trade name of 'EVIAN' natural spring water from French Alps;

(c) what are the reasons for allowing import of such water; and